



**INDEPENDENT INQUIRY ON CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN
NORTHERN IRELAND**

CONSULTATION WITH CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE

JULY 2014

BACKGROUND

Children and young people in care should grow up in safe, stable, peaceful placements and be protected from harm and exploitation. Local research by Barnardo's in 2011 and a report by the Children's Commissioner in England in 2012 acknowledged that while there is risk across the youth population, children in care, especially those in residential care, are at greater risk of sexual exploitation. In particular, children and young people who run away from residential placements or children's homes are at greatest risk of being exploited.

In 2013, serious concerns were raised about a number of young people in care going missing and that they were being sexually exploited. In response, the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Edwin Poots MLA directed the SBNI to carry out a thematic review to look at how agencies helped and looked after this specific group of young people. The review will examine the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements.

In addition to this, the Minister launched an independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation (CSE) in Northern Ireland led by Kathleen Marshall and supported by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA), the Criminal Justice Inspectorate (CJI) and The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). This inquiry seeks to establish the nature and scale of child sexual exploitation not only in the looked after population but across Northern Ireland.

To inform the independent inquiry, VOYPIC agreed to gather the views of care experienced young people. To capture the diversity and experience of children and young people, we used our visiting advocacy service in children's homes as well as a series of workshops in Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCT).

Process of engagement

In March 2014 VOYPIC met with RQIA to agree a schedule and process for consultation with children and young people. VOYPIC area managers liaised with representatives from each Trust to agree young people's engagement across all five HSCTs.

Young people were supported to participate in a number of ways including at Trust wide workshops, during visiting advocacy sessions in children's homes or through questionnaires. The mechanism used for engagement was based on the individual needs and circumstances of each young person.

VOYPIC set up an internal working group with practitioners to design the group work session for young people. The group work plan was shared with each Trust representative and relevant residential staff and managers. To promote the workshops, VOYPIC designed a flyer to share with young people, their parents and carers.

During the course of the consultation if young people raised any issues of concern, VOYPIC followed child protection policies and procedures and liaised with Trust representatives to agree appropriate action.

Key messages

We consulted with 55 young people aged 12 and over in all five HSCTs during visiting advocacy sessions, at community based workshops and using individual questionnaires. The following key issues emerged:

1. Language and terminology

While the majority of young people recognised the term "child sexual exploitation" and/or CSE they were confused about its meaning. Some young people saw it as part of a spectrum or continuum of criminal behaviour and sexual abuse.

Using the word “child” and “sexual” together seems to make some young people uncomfortable. The use of “child” also enables some young people to dissociate themselves as they do not consider themselves as children even though they are under 16. Young people suggested that the term CSE should be reviewed and changed.

2. Real understanding

While the majority of young people recognised the term CSE, there was not an accurate understanding of what it is. For many it was associated with other criminal and/or sexual behaviour but still understood as child abuse. It was also associated with the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry (HIAI) as well as Operation Yewtree and other high profile criminal investigations.

While young people may know what CSE is, and how to keep safe on a day to day basis, they do not fully understand the nature and process of exploitation. They do not recognise how they personally could be vulnerable to being exploited over time.

3. The party scene

We heard about the party scene and its link to CSE. All young people identified drugs and alcohol as a feature of this scene and how it is used to build trust, friendship and dependence leading to vulnerability. Peer pressure and not wanting to “lose status” at the party scene also feature. Local party venues are widely known amongst young people.

4. Information and resources

Many young people recognised the materials and leaflets published by the SBNI but there was a low level of knowledge about what they contain.

Young people said that the focus for both information and media spotlight is often on the victim of exploitation rather than the perpetrator or alleged perpetrator. Key messages or campaigns about CSE should highlight its

criminality and warn those who would take advantage of vulnerable young people that they will be pursued and prosecuted.

5. Interventions and responses to incidents and risks

From the young people's perspective there was a strong sense of "over-reaction" by carers and those in authority which led to their frustration. Similarly, there was a strong perception of different responses to the issue depending on a child's placement. They also perceived a different response to young people in care and their peers in the community.

We gathered plenty of ideas about more measured responses and the importance of relationships and building trust over time.

6. Support for supporters

We heard views on how foster carers and support workers (especially those in children's homes) are prepared, able and supported to respond and intervene.

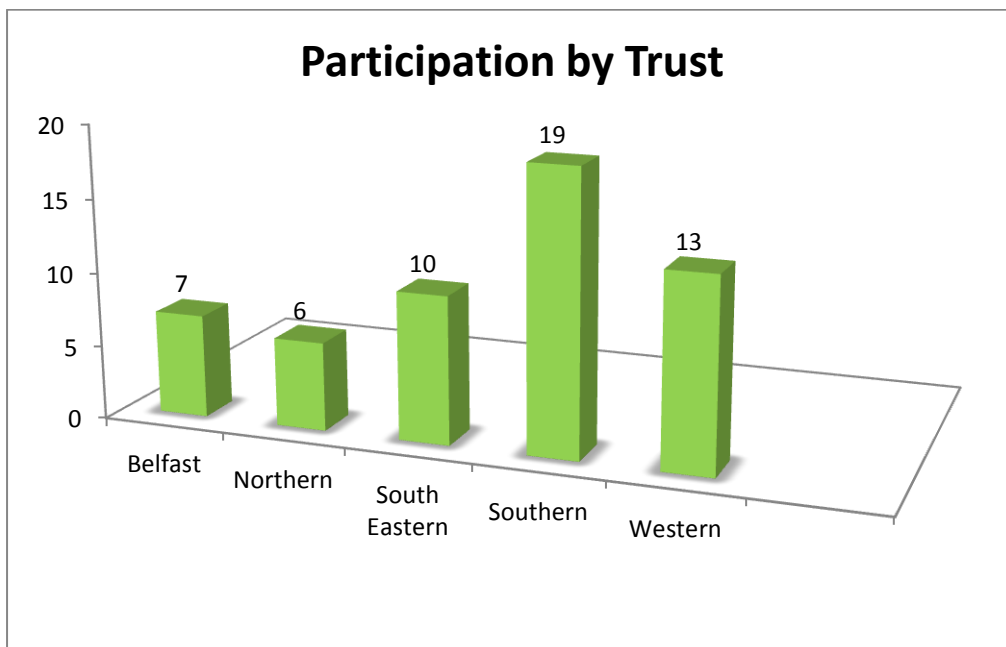
Young people have strong ideas about what training is required, and about the need for clear guidance and understanding of roles, responsibilities and levels of authority.

CONSULTATION WITH CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE

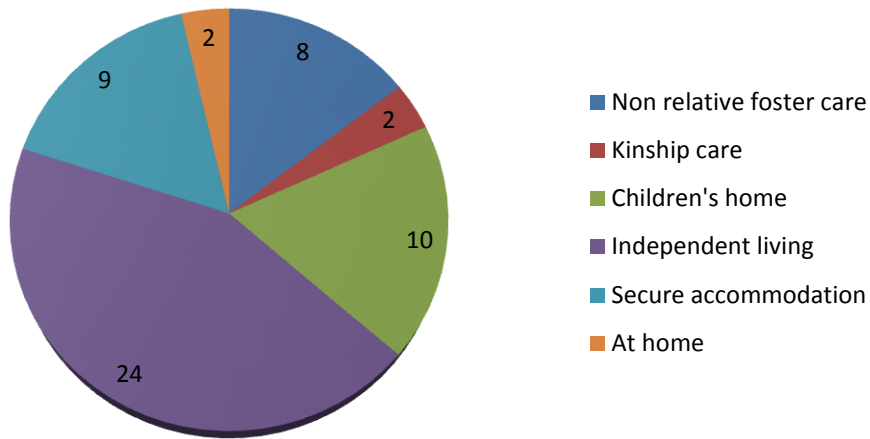
Who did we hear from?

We held six community workshops in local HSCTs as well as workshops in four children's home and two workshops in the Lakewood Centre (the regional secure accommodation unit). Five young people completed individual questionnaires.

Overall, we consulted **55** children and young people, aged 12 to 25, from the five HSCTs.

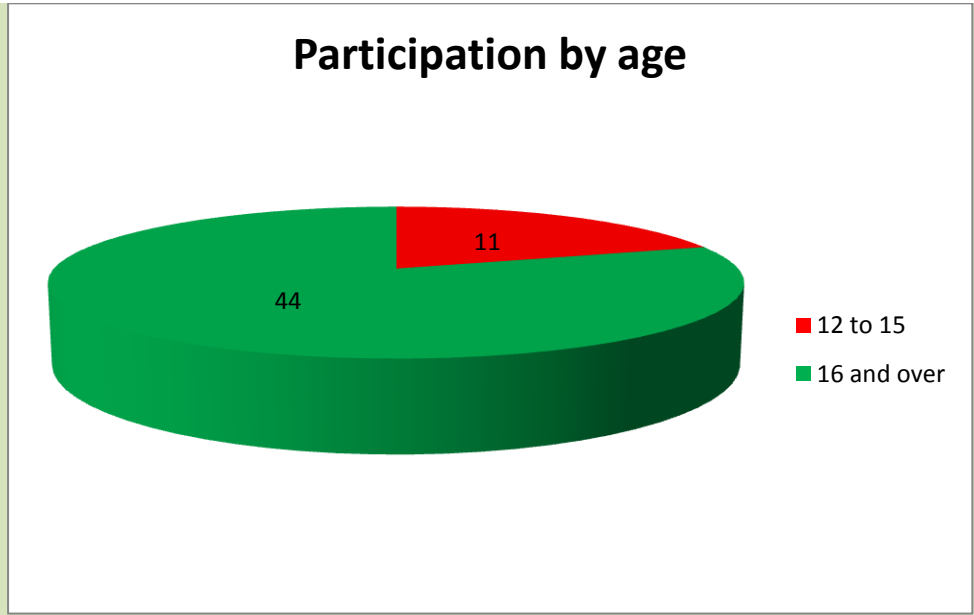


Participation by placement type

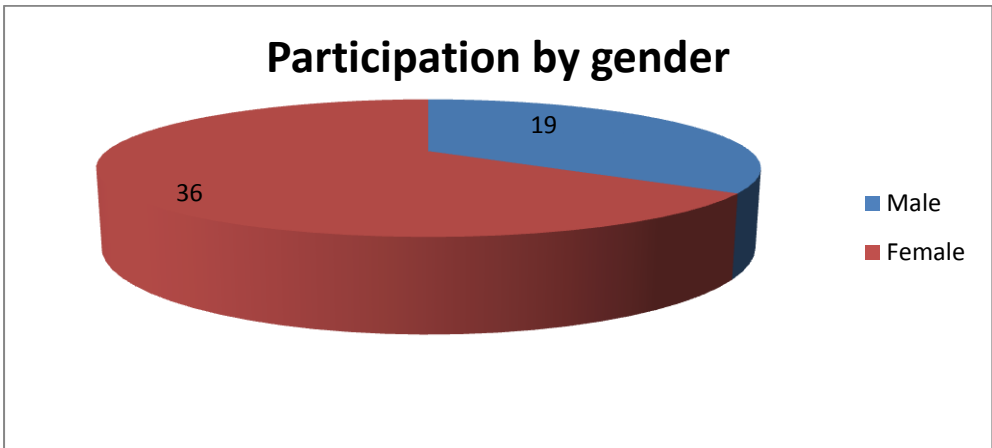


Nineteen participants (35%) were living in children's homes including nine in the Lakewood Centre. A total of 10 young people were living in non-relative foster and kinship foster care.

Twenty four (44%) of our consultation group were living independently reflecting the high number aged over 16 with only two care leavers living at home with birth family.



The majority (80%) of the group were aged over 16 and 20% are aged 12 to 15.



More girls than boys took part in the workshops with almost two thirds (62%) female. This is not representative of the overall population of over 16s in the looked after population where there are slightly more males (51%) than females (49%) (Delegated Statutory Functions (Including Corporate Parenting Report) Statistical Report 31st March 2013)

Individual consultation

Our local teams also invited young people to participate on an individual basis using a questionnaire. A total of five questionnaires were completed in the Southern, South Eastern and Western HSCTs.

What did we talk about?

We based the workshops and questionnaire on the terms of reference of the independent inquiry. Workshops were designed to make sure children and young people had the chance to tell us about their views and opinions on child sexual exploitation.

In particular young people were asked to comment on and discuss:

- Their understanding of child sexual exploitation (CSE)
- Where or from whom they learned about CSE
- The ways in which a young person can be taken advantage of
- The effectiveness of current safeguarding and protection arrangements
- Measures being taken to prevent and respond to risks and CSE
- Recommendations to prevent and respond to risk and CSE

The workshops also explored how young people are kept safe, what things are in place to keep them safe, if these are working and if there something else that could be done to make life safer for children and young people.

This report reflects the different themes and the range of questions at the workshops.

Language, Terminology and Understanding

Young people talked about the term child sexual exploitation and what they thought it meant. There is familiarity but a lack of clear understanding and some degree of naivety.

The majority (45/82%) of the young people said they had heard the term “CSE” and the majority (45/82%) also said that they knew what the term meant. There was also some vagueness about the term and its meaning.

“Heard about it but don’t know about it”

“Sounds familiar”

Participants identified different sources when asked where they found out about CSE. The majority reported that they heard about it through the media. Others also cited their connection with organisations such as Include Youth, NSPCC, VOYPIC and Women’s Aid as the source of their knowledge and insight. They talked about attending group sessions on keeping safe and CSE as part of various personal development programmes.

What am I? A child or young person?

Young people raised several issues when talking about the term child sexual exploitation or CSE. Firstly they reflected a difficulty with the term child sexual exploitation, in particular with the use of the word “child” alongside the term “sexual”. This seemed to make some young people uncomfortable. Using “child” also enabled some young people to dissociate themselves as they did not consider themselves as children despite their age.

“A child is an eight year-old - maybe it should just be called sexual exploitation”

Some participants felt that the term child sexual exploitation was about “really young children being abused”.

‘The word “child” and “sexual” shouldn’t go together’

What do you REALLY understand?

Although the majority of young people were familiar with and recognised the term CSE, when they were asked to define it there was a level of confusion, vagueness and naivety.

For the majority of young people there was a lack of understanding about if or how CSE is distinguished from child abuse or other sexual offences. Some young people associated CSE with other inquiries reflected in the media such as the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry. Others talked about CSE in the context of Operation Yewtree, Jimmy Saville, paedophiles and human trafficking.

“Children being sexually abused”

One young person linked CSE with the current media coverage about young schools girls kidnapped from their school in Nigeria.

Media coverage of sexual abuse and criminal activity seems to play a large part in young people's awareness of CSE. It may also lead to some confusion and association with other types of sexual abuse and criminal behaviour.

The majority of young people referenced the news and feature coverage of CSE in Northern Ireland in 2013 and how this was the first time they had heard the term CSE. Others discussed media coverage and disclosures by people who were abused as children. One young person recalled a storyline in EastEnders soap opera which focused on sexual exploitation.

The power of TV and other media is clear when considering ways of raising awareness or information campaigns but also raises the challenge of how to communicate clearly to ensure comprehensive understanding.

A group of young people who live in foster care said that their foster carers had talked to them about child sexual exploitation and how to stay safe. They described CSE like this:

“A form of abuse”

“Touching kids inappropriately”

“Exploiting physical and sexual health”

“Older men taking advantage of young girls”

Although there was some lack of understanding, a small number of young people were able to identify elements of CSE such as the grooming process, being forced into sexual acts in exchange for something and the prevalence of drugs and alcohol as part of the process.

“Male/female buying or grooming for sexual intentions”

Compared to this was a keen understanding of how young people might keep themselves safe in acute circumstances, for example, not walking home alone, "*keeping your phone handy*" and not drinking too much. There was, worryingly, little insight into ways to recognise exploitative relationships.

In essence, young people know what steps to take to help prevent a sudden, sexual assault but did not know how to recognise or prevent sexually exploitative relationships.

Although they did not identify as potential victims of CSE, some young people talked about occasions when they had heard about it happening to other young people. Two young men said they had heard of young girls being taken advantage of by older men. They described how they would give them drugs to "*make them vulnerable*" and encourage them to go to parties and perform sexual acts in exchange for drugs.

Another insight reflected by some young people was how the focus for both information and media spotlight is often on the victim of exploitation rather than the perpetrator or alleged perpetrator. They said that messages about CSE should be about its criminality and warn perpetrators that they will be pursued and prosecuted.

"There are no messages being promoted for the perpetrator - what is their message? It is all well and good that young people are being educated about CSE but the perpetrators will always find someone"

Party house and other scenes

Young people know about the ways in which children and young people can be groomed and manipulated. They referred to incidents when they believed friends or acquaintances were exploited and what happens in the party houses and in other public places and spaces. They did not see themselves as potential victims.

The definition of CSE in the Barnardo's report *Not a World Away* is "...befriend, groom and establish dependence, provide drugs and alcohol, bring to a party or introduce to a wider network of friends, sexually assault or coerce into sexual activity".

The majority of young people had experience of going to party houses and talked about the prevalence of drugs and alcohol at these parties. . They described how drugs and alcohol are available for everyone and that they did not have to do anything in exchange for them.

"...sometimes you bring your own but usually everyone shares and I don't have to do anything in exchange for them... just good times."

Although some young people were engaging in drugs and alcohol at parties, they did not see this as risky behaviour or see how this may make them vulnerable. However, when we explored the issue of vulnerability, they recognised how drugs and alcohol can be used to sexually exploit young people and be used to make them "*more vulnerable*".

"They give them drugs/alcohol and make them vulnerable - and get them high"

“If you are under the influence you are more likely to go to a party with people you don't know...”

They described how a young person may be given “free” drugs and alcohol at the beginning, to gain their trust as a friend and then something is expected in exchange. They identified how a young person can be manipulated to engage in sexual activity in exchange for “free” drugs and alcohol. They recognised how this can lead to the young person becoming dependent on that person as a source to provide them with drugs and/or alcohol.

It is concerning that although some young people understand and recognise the risks involved with drugs and alcohol, they do not acknowledge their own vulnerability. They recognise the role of drugs and alcohol in child sexual exploitation but appear to separate this from their own experience and see them as:

“Just having a good time”

Peer pressure to attend parties and “fit in” was discussed and how this can lead to young people taking part in risky behaviour. Young people talked about how it can be difficult to get out of a situation they know is unsafe because they're feeling peer pressure and fear *“losing their status in the group”*. What was described is when a young person has little or no support network; they will not want to lose whatever friends they think they do have.

In our consultation group, young people talked about how children and young people in care may be more vulnerable to peer pressure because they may feel more isolated than young people who are not in care. They also felt that young people in care *“just want someone to care about them”* and want to *“fit in”*.

There appeared to be widespread knowledge of where parties are being held. Young people discussed how widespread the “party culture” is and how there is always somewhere to go.

“There are always parties going on and “everyone knows where they are”

Other places and spaces were discussed as likely locations where young people are targeted. These include outside discos, at late night fast-food outlets and car parks where groups congregate especially when drinking or drunk.

The role of social media

Mobile phones and social media are a way of advertising party venues. They may also be used by perpetrators and as part of grooming and abusing.

It was evident that mobile phones and social networking for example, Blackberry Messenger (BBM) are used to advertise and invite young people to parties. One young person also described how BBM is used as a way to find a lift home.

“Some people broadcast on BBM for a lift when staff won't get you one”

Worryingly, another young person described what can sometimes be asked for in exchange for a lift home:

“Usually a boy pops up offering a lift for sexual favours”

It is concerning that young people are not only being exposed to risks via social media but that they are also exposing themselves to dangerous situations, for example, advertising for lifts on BBM.

Internet grooming and abuse

Young people discussed the grooming process. They talked about how children and young people could be groomed via social networking. They talked about how easy it is for an older person to groom a young person through a social network site such as Facebook as they can lie about who they are and what age they are.

They described how the older person will befriend the young person and gain their trust over a period of time perhaps through buying them things and paying them attention.

There was also discussion about who and what type of person perpetrators target or “prey on”. There was a general perception that a perpetrator is usually an older male in the community preying on younger females. Young people said they prey on people who are vulnerable and perhaps do not have many friends and try and become the “*perfect friend*” to the young person.

Explicit images

Amongst the young people we talked to, there wasn't widespread experience or discussion of sexting or sending sexually explicit pictures. Only one group of young people in our consultation discussed their experience of sexting and how prevalent it is amongst young people in their school. They didn't appear to see this type of activity as unsafe or dangerous.

They said that they have had talks from the PSNI and from “Love for Life” to educate young people about making safe choices when it comes to relationships and sex.

Information and resources

Young people recognised the SBNI materials on CSE – they had noticed them but did not think they were effective.

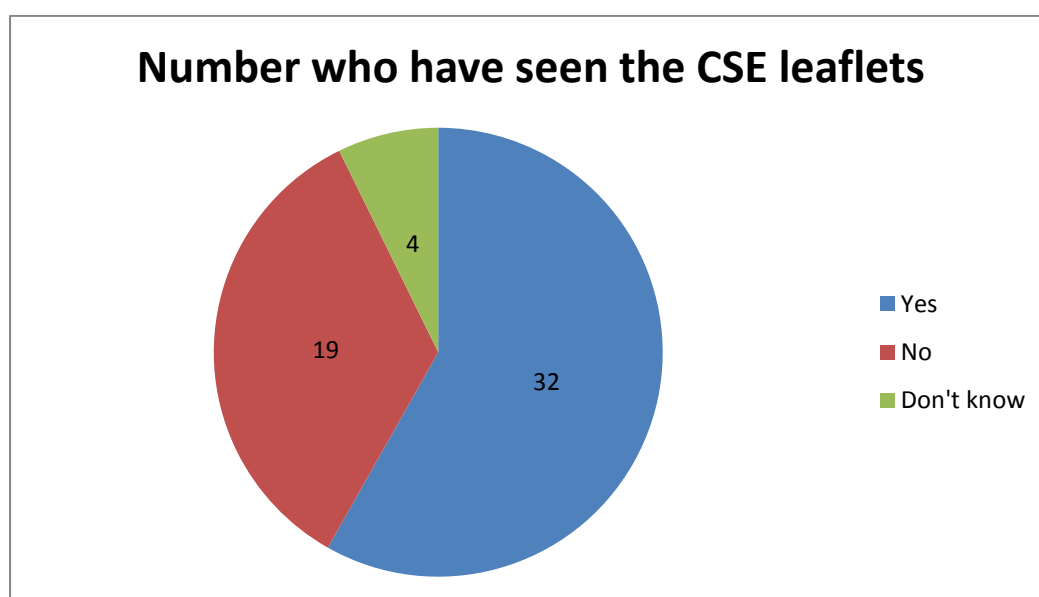
The majority of young people (32/58%) said they had seen the SBNI leaflets on CSE. 35%(19) of participants did not recognise the leaflets and 7% (4) said they “*didn't know*” if they had seen the leaflets.

Although the majority said they had seen the leaflets, very few reported having read or noted them.

“Yes I have seen them but not interested in reading them”

“Just had a look”

“I have seen them in the hallway which is a good place to put them as we gather there but we have not read them”



When asked about where they have seen the leaflets there was a variety of responses such as GP surgery, PSNI stations, pharmacy, VOYPIC, community centres and children's homes. It's clear that the leaflets are being distributed widely across Northern Ireland and that young people are noticing them but not retaining the information or messages.

When asked why they did not read the leaflets they said:

"I would only read it if I was bored, I would get curious and read it"

"You would be embarrassed to pick it up because of what it says on the front"

Young people liked the design of the SBNI leaflets, in particular the size of the leaflet that folds out and also the use of "graffiti style" art. Although they liked the size of the leaflet that folds out they said that it is very busy and that the typeface is difficult to read.

"Too many words - messages could be shorter...more visual"

"Exploitation" is a fancy word...some young people wouldn't know what that means"

Some thought that there is too much information and writing which would not be suitable for young people with reading difficulties. They suggested keeping the design and images used in the leaflets but reducing the amount of text to make it accessible to all ages and abilities.

"Too much information on it – not eye catching and you would have to spend 15 minutes to read it over and over to take the information in."

Alternative or additional ways to promote messages and share information include Apps for mobile phones and/or websites, using pop ups or adverts on social network sites and using real life stories told visually via Facebook or other platforms.

“Use true stories to highlight CSE”

“Peer mentoring for young people in care”

Prevention and intervention

Young people talked about training, education and awareness as preventative measures. They know what responses work well and how perceived excessive reactions from carers, PSNI and support workers frustrate them.

There was a general consensus amongst young people that current measures to prevent and respond to risks and CSE are not working as effectively as they could and that a better approach should be considered.

Although young people were able to identify some preventative approaches such as awareness raising talks by the PSNI and other organisations like Include Youth and Barnardo's Safe Choices, they talked more frequently about short term responses to acute incidents as opposed to long-term or on-going responses to risk taking behaviour and going missing.

“Safe Choices people come out to talk to young people”

“Some schools and colleges are doing work around this”

Young people discussed what happens if a carer or key worker in a children's home suspects that a young person is not safe and is at risk of going missing. Young people gave examples of practice in residential and foster care and the different approaches taken by staff and carers.

Three themes emerged:

- Different approaches used in children's homes and foster care
- Perceived “over reaction” by staff or carers and excessive engagement with the PSNI when a child or young person goes missing
- Use of secure accommodation

Foster care

For some young people the response and intervention by foster carers to risky behaviour is effective. They discussed how foster carers use discipline to establish boundaries and resolve difficulties. They described a process where boundaries are discussed and agreed between the foster carer and the young person. Talking calmly and continuously with one carer and addressing the issues with the young person were significant features. Some young people said that the PSNI do not seem to be called immediately or automatically and there was no sense of an “*over-the-top*” reaction to risky behaviour.

Young people who had also experienced living in a children's home said that this approach can be more difficult in a group living situation.

“There is too much change in staff and you can't build relationships”

This more measured response allows the young person to talk through issues with the foster carer and address their behaviour together in a “*reasonable way*”.

Children's homes

Young people who were or had lived in children's homes told us that a chaotic environment or atmosphere can be difficult and can have an impact on their behaviour. They described the difficulties of group living and living with a range of different children and young people who “*have their own issues to deal with*”.

They felt that this can make it hard for young people to build strong relationships with staff and to feel comfortable talking through issues such as safety and socialising especially if they find themselves in risky situations.

“Feels like no-one wants them and the young person knows this so they don't care about anything or anyone and leads to all sorts of bad behaviours and then they still can't go home”.

Nearly every group discussed “over-reactions” by children's home staff. Young people described what they perceive to be excessive contact with and engagement by the PSNI when a child or young person does not return home when they were supposed to. They did, however, recognise the efforts made by staff to try and find young people when they don't return home:

“Staff do a town search to try and find us”

“They continue to call young people and leave warnings on their phone that they are going to ring the police if they don't return”

They believe that there must be more effective ways of managing absconding and risk-taking behaviour. They understood the need for police involvement in certain high risk instances but felt that, at present, they are called too often and too readily.

“Staff should show that they care about the young person. Staff should explain in more detail the reasons for some of their actions like taking mobile phones at night”

“Staff need to explain to young people the consequences of their actions and not issue threats”

Another theme was on rules and sanctions and young people identified two issues with these. The first is about applying age appropriate rules to the young people living together in a children's home and, secondly, applying fair rules according to individual circumstances.

Young people described how rules and discipline in a home are applied to everyone regardless of age. It's not uncommon for there to be young people of various ages living in a children's home. The children and young people we spoke to suggested that rules should be flexible and reflect your age and maturity.

"Rules should be different depending on age"

Some young people described blanket sanctions in children's homes and how unfair this was, especially if you have not been *"causing any trouble"*.

One young person used an example of how staff responded when one or two young people in his children's home were going missing. He described how, in order to safeguard those two young people from risk staff applied the same sanctions and curfew to all the young people in the home. The young people suggested that having clear sanctions agreed and applied according to the individual circumstances would work better.

A few young people talked about their own experience and the reaction of staff when they *"make a mistake"* for example, not returning home when they should and engaging in taking drugs and alcohol.

"Messed up but they don't give you another chance"

They described feeling that they were continuously punished for one mistake and if they didn't come home on time, staff would assume that they had been out taking drugs and alcohol *"even when I wasn't!"*.

It's OTT!

From the perspective of the young people, there is often an over-reaction and an over the top (OTT) response by those in positions of care and authority. This leads to frustration and ineffective outcomes for young

people. A lot of young people talked about the reaction of staff when they don't come back on time. One young person said:

"Staff overreact and call the police when you don't come back when you were supposed to. A parent wouldn't call the police if you didn't come back straight away, so why is it different for young people in care?"

They described being frustrated because they didn't identify themselves as being missing but that they didn't come back when they were supposed to.

"Pissed off because I am fine - I am safe but the staff are worried"

They described different approaches used in different placement types and school settings and towards young people in care and those in the community.

Harbourer's Warning Notices

"Harbouring orders" were discussed by young people as a way of preventing child sexual exploitation and keeping young people safe. They called them "harbouring orders" as opposed to their legal term "Harbourer's Warning Notice". They described these "orders" as a way of keeping an alleged perpetrator away from a young person. They suggested that they should be used more to protect young people if concerns are raised about CSE.

Whilst they had little knowledge of how they work in practice, it is positive to note that young people are aware of the use of Harbouring Warning Notices as a way of preventing CSE.

Going missing....returning home

Young people talked about what happens when a young person returns to their placement after being missing and the approach taken by staff and carers. They shared their ideas about what would make for a better response and what staff should do when a young person returns home.

Young people talked about occasions when they believe they are safe and the reaction of staff is out of proportion. This includes staff contacting their friends and others in an effort to locate them and have them return. This seems to be a source of irritation and frustration for young people and ineffective in changing their attitude or behaviour.

“Staff do a town search to try and find us”

They also expressed frustration at the excessive contact with the PSNI at times when they perceive the risk to be low and the behaviour not of particular concern.

“Pissed off because I am fine. I am safe but the staff are worried.”

It is clear that these responses are not effective and may result in a young person refusing to engage with support staff or the PSNI.

Young people discussed what, if anything happens in the aftermath of going missing and returning. There is a process of interview and conversation when a child or young person returns home after being missing and the level of formality depends on who carries out the interview.

“Nothing happens if we don't tell them where we went”

“Police come up to the house when we return”

We didn't hear evidence of a standard response or process of interview following incidents of missing. It seems that if the PSNI were involved in bringing the young person home they will conduct a formal interview. It was not clear at what stage or how quickly this happens.

When it is a staff member who brings the young person home (without PSNI involvement) the process may be more informal and the young person is...

"Just asked lots of questions about where they have been and who they have been with".

Young people discussed what they perceive to be excessive questioning both by PSNI and staff and described this response as "OTT" (over the top). They also talked about the sanctions that are used by staff in response to going missing for example, no lifts to events or activities, restricted access to mobile phones and restrictions on pocket money. Sanctions seem to have limited value or effect. Instead young people felt that staff should talk to them more and highlight the consequences of the risks they may be taking by using drugs and alcohol and agree together acceptable behaviour and how to keep safe.

Secure accommodation as a response

The majority of young people talked about how secure accommodation features as a response to some young people placing themselves at significant risk and going missing from children's homes or other care placements.

They talked about how secure accommodation is used both as a threat to young people who may be engaging in risky behaviours and as an intervention when a young person becomes very unsafe. They felt that this response was not effective in preventing CSE or further harm. Whilst placing a young person in secure accommodation may take them out of the immediate and acute situation, they are placed back into the same community and environment on discharge. It is their belief that this environment will not have changed and that the young person will be exposed to the same dangers and risks.

Support for the supporters

Young people considered whether staff and foster carers have the confidence and ability to take action to protect young people who are at risk of being exploited. They identified issues that may prevent staff and foster carers from having the confidence to take effective action.

There were plenty of views on how foster carers and support workers – especially those in residential care - are able, trained and supported to respond and intervene during incidents that lead to risk of CSE. Young people discussed the need for training, clear guidance and understanding of roles, responsibilities and levels of authority.

There was a clear message from young people that just because they're late home or absent without permission doesn't mean that they are at risk or coming to great harm. They reflected the need for balance between their desire to socialise and for excitement with that of keeping safe and being protected.

Young people perceive a lack of confidence amongst children's home staff to intervene when they are concerned that a young person is at risk. In their view this lack of confidence leads to the PSNI being called prematurely to intervene unnecessarily to protect young people.

"Staff don't have confidence which is why police is phoned"

"Staff and foster carers are powerless - they can't prevent something if they don't know what is going on"

There was also a perception from young people that there is a lack of training given to staff on how to manage and respond to risky behaviours including CSE. One group of young people felt that...

“Staff only seem to learn on the job”

They felt that there should be more training for staff and carers on how to respond to young people who may be putting themselves at risk.

Joint training or information sessions with staff, carers *and* young people together might help to raise young people's awareness of the issues and difficulties facing staff and carers. From their perspective, involving children and young people in developing strategies to respond to those who are in danger of being exploited would ensure a more effective and meaningful response.

What would keep you safe?

Young people considered what approaches staff and carers should take to keep children and young people safe. They identified areas for improvement and ideas for helping. The relationship between staff and young people in children's homes is of key importance and features strongly.

Staff and parents respond

Young people raised the perceived "OTT" response of residential care staff to risky behaviour and going missing as something that needs to be addressed and improved. There was discussion about how to tackle this and how to implement more measured responses to young people going missing as well as the importance of key relationships. They contrasted this with the approach of a "reasonable" parent who would be unlikely to call the police so quickly raising the question of why should it be so different for children in care?

Relationships

Young people continued to emphasise the importance of building key relationships between support workers and young people. This would help create a more open environment in children's homes which would help young people and staff work together to manage risky behaviour.

There was discussion on the difficulties young people in children's homes can face sharing problems with support workers. Frequent changes to staff and poor or weak relationships with staff make it difficult for young people to confide. Young people also identified a perceived lack of confidentiality in children's homes as a barrier preventing young people talking to staff about problems. They feared that if they confided in one staff member this would be shared with others.

As an alternative to the temptation to seek excitement and risk, young people suggested having more activities in children's homes and supporting young people to get involved in their local community and volunteering.

“Getting young people involved in the local community and in volunteering... with VOYPIC, youth club... if you have too much time on your hands, you can end up hanging out with wrong crowd”

This is closely linked to relationships between young people, their carers and support workers. They emphasised the importance of staff spending more time with young people and less time on administration.

“At home your parents spend time with you and they don't go off for hours to do admin”

Peer education and support

Peer mentoring and peer education using real-life stories of CSE was suggested as a way to support and educate young people about the dangers of risk taking behaviour and CSE.

Story-telling is a very effective and powerful way of educating young people about danger, risk taking and CSE. Having real life examples would make it relevant to young people and help them to understand what CSE is and how to keep themselves safe. A lot of young people said that peer education as well as case studies of real life stories of CSE would be effective in highlighting the dangers of CSE. This should involve care experienced young people and others who have insight into risks.

GOOD PRACTICE CASE STUDY

Hotel disco for 13 – 18 year olds

We asked young people for their ideas on what would make a difference to their safety. One group talked about a teenage disco that is held at a local hotel. They described this as a way of helping young people socialise safely without drugs and alcohol. They said that there is strict security and the role of the bouncers was crucial in creating a safe place for young people to socialise.

Hotel X has been running a teenage disco over many years. Recently, in response to an increase in younger children attending the disco, they spoke to local parents and young people about what a successful, safe club night for young people should be like. They also spoke to local businesses to develop a partnership. In 2011, the hotel launched their Club 13 -17 nights as well as their new membership system.

Membership

- Must be between 13 and 18 years old
- When signing up, each young person has to fill in a form which asks for their name, date of birth, address and a contact number for parents or carers in case the management team needs to contact them
- Membership card costs £10 which includes their ticket for the disco
- The data contained on the membership system is computerised, password protected and stored securely
- The membership card includes discounts for cinema, local shops, etc
- Each young person gets an ID card with their name and picture

All staff including door staff, managers and cloakroom staff are required to complete a child protection course. In addition to this the door staff must have valid SIA licences and there are at least two fully trained First Aid officers on the premises at all times.

Each bar in the club is stripped of all alcohol as well as Red Bull and Lucozade prior to Club 13 -17 events. If a young person is under the influence of alcohol, they will be taken to the First Aid room and supervised until a family member can collect them.

Where young people require medication for example for diabetes, this is stored safely and administered by First Aid staff.

The Club 13 -18 membership system has been successfully running for over three years and averages 1000 young people each club night.

CONCLUSION

While there is recognition of the term “child sexual exploitation” there is a degree of naivety and shallow comprehension of what it means. For many it is associated with criminal and/or sexual behaviour. It is understood by most as child abuse. The young people we spoke to did not see themselves as children. Nor did they see themselves as potential victims of CSE.

Whilst there was an understanding of how young people might keep themselves safe in acute circumstances there was little insight into how to recognise exploitative relationships and keep safe. In essence, there was confusion between a sudden, sexual assault and the process of exploitation and the nature of it.

The power of TV and other media is clear when considering awareness raising or information campaigns. Young people get a lot of their information from television and other media outlets. Clear and concise information is vital to ensure comprehensive understanding.

One insight reflected by some young people was how the focus for both information and media is often on the victim of exploitation rather than the perpetrator or alleged perpetrator. Campaigns about CSE should focus on its criminality and warn those who would take advantage of vulnerable young people that they will be pursued and prosecuted.

There was a general consensus amongst young people that current measures to prevent and respond to risks and CSE are not working as effectively as they could and that a different approach should be considered.

Participants were able to identify responses to young people at risk of exploitation and mentioned sanctions, return interviews, talks on keeping safe etc. However they did not discuss the use of safety plans, risk management meetings or how the care planning and LAC review process is used to protect children and young people.

There appears to be a difference of opinion between adults and young people about what is risky or dangerous. At times young people do not understand adults' level of concern and this can cause tension. From the young people's perspective there was a strong sense of over-reaction by carers and those in authority leading to frustration. They reflected the need for balance between their desire to socialise and for excitement with that of keeping them safe and protected. They would like to see a more measured response to being absent without permission and absconding and risk-taking behaviour.

There was a lot of emphasis on the value of peer mentoring and peer education and for using "real-life" stories of CSE to support and educate young people about the dangers of risk taking behaviour and CSE.

RECOMMENDATIONS

During the consultation, young people came up with suggestions and recommendations to help keep them safe and help prevent CSE.

Campaigns and public messages

- Re-think the term. Young people do not relate to the term Child Sexual Exploitation. Any public campaign should take this into account and consider alternative language and terminology.
- Branding on the front of leaflets and other materials should be subtle so that young people will not be put off picking up and reading them.
- Young people did not understand the process and the nature of exploitation. All awareness materials should use clear, simple and age-appropriate language. Information should include how to recognise an exploitative relationship and how to keep safe.
- Young people get a lot of their information from TV and other media outlets. Any public campaign should consider using local and national TV stations and programmes to promote their message.
- Most of the young people used social media regularly. Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites should be used to promote key messages about CSE. Social media providers have a responsibility to educate young people on keeping safe online in order to protect them from exploitation.
- All of the young people talked about the value of learning from their peers and hearing real-life stories. Peer education should be a key component of any awareness raising strategy.
- Young people highlighted that all current messages appear to be focused on potential victims of CSE. They would like to see a public campaign that sends a clear message to perpetrators that they will be pursued and prosecuted.

Protecting children in care

The children and young people we spoke to are aware that this is a community wide issue but they had particular recommendations for protecting children in care.

- Children and young people highlighted that they would like to be able to develop strong and individual relationships with staff in children's homes. The care system should support and encourage quality and continuity of relationships at its heart.
- Children and young people want to be involved in developing personal rules and sanctions in response to their own risk-taking behaviour if required to ensure that the response is age appropriate and meaningful.
- There appears to be a difference of opinion between adults and young people about what is risky or dangerous. At times young people do not understand adults' level of concern and this can cause tension. Joint workshops with staff and young people will help them understand each other's position and develop meaningful and effective responses to young people at risk.
- Young people commented on staff learning on the job and not having the confidence to deal with specific situations. All newly qualified and bank staff should have appropriate training and support.
- To address young people's perception of responses by the PSNI and carers as OTT, young people should be involved in any future review of the current Regional Guidance: Police Involvement in Residential Units, Safeguarding of Children Missing.
- There didn't appear to be a standard response to young people when they return home from being missing. Some young people described difficulty disclosing information to staff and carers. They suggested having an independent person or advocate to help them share sensitive information more easily.

- Young people did not think that secure accommodation was an effective response to CSE. They would like help to develop strategies to avoid exploitative situations and relationships when placed back in the community.

A community response

- Young people talked openly about widely known party houses where drugs and alcohol are available. Safeguarding authorities need to work with the local community to disrupt the activities of adults who would take advantage of young people.
- Young people talked about wanting to socialise and take part in activities as a way of avoiding risky or dangerous situations. We need to explore how youth and community groups provide safe but attractive ways for young people to socialise.
- The use of drugs and alcohol was raised by all young people. We need an updated and robust regional strategy to tackle the prevalence and impact of both legal highs and illegal substances.